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ABSTRACT

Thirty-eight college faculty members and 30 business and government managers responded to questionnaires that elicited information about the types of writing they required of students and prospective employees. The questionnaire distributed to faculty members requested information about the kinds of writing assignments they gave, the factors they used in judging student writing, and the weaknesses they most often encountered in that writing. The managerial questionnaire requested information about the various writing tasks performed by the managers and their employees, the writing skills sought in prospective employees, and the writing weaknesses commonly encountered in employee communications. Writing samples of students and employees were also elicited. The results revealed 35 types of business writing, 29 writing skills sought in prospective employees, 25 weaknesses in business writing, 22 kinds of college writing assignments, 53 factors by which such writing was judged, and 44 weaknesses commonly encountered by college teachers. (FL)

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Christopher J. Thaiss
The Northern Virginia Writing Project

July 1978

The Writing Required by Professors and Managers: Two Surveys

The Northern Virginia Writing Project is founded and funded partly on the belief that a writing crisis exists in Northern Virginia, with the same symptoms that have raised cries for competency tests and crash programs throughout the country. The demands come from parents who want high SAT scores, from business people who decry the illiteracy of job applicants, and from college teachers, including me, who wish that someone along the teaching chain had cured all the ills that weaken freshman papers.

In my position in the English Department at George Mason I hear these cries coming from teachers in other departments who wonder, "What the hell are you doing in English?" The cries also come from other members of my own department who shake their heads at my teaching priorities, even while I shake my head at theirs. I also wince every time an editorial, a letter-to-the-editor, or a voice at a faculty meeting complains about the "poor writing skills" of young people in schools, business, and government.

Since I aim to please, I scan the editorials, letters, and articles, and I question my colleagues in other disciplines, to learn specifically what my teaching of writing should accomplish. Here I hit a snag. The cries, I find, are inarticulate. The complainers, whether academic, mercantile, or bureaucratic, do not hold up exemplary writings for me to learn from; nor do they show exactly how bad samples can be improved. Indeed, I cannot learn from what I read or hear precisely what kinds of writing are done in the various offices and classrooms, so that I might know for what to prepare my students.

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To cure my ignorance I wrote and distributed two questionnaires, one to the George Mason summer faculty and the other to business and government managers. Further impetus for the GMU questionnaire came from the NVWP Fellows, who asked the college representatives to tell them the requirements of "college writing."

Format

The college questionnaire asked three questions:

1) What kinds of writing assignments do you give your students (e.g., research, analysis, short exam essay, book review, identification)?

2) Upon what factors do you judge student writing? (What qualities do you expect an "A" writing to exhibit?)

3) What are the weaknesses which you most often encounter in student writing?

I also sought from each teacher a writing sample which he or she felt "exemplifie /d/ 'A' work." I suggested "an essay response to an exam question" as a possibility. I made this request optional, because I did not want a teacher to ignore the entire questionnaire if he or she, for whatever reason, did not wish to include a writing sample.

The managerial questionnaire made three similar requests:

1) Please list the various writing tasks performed by you and your employees (or subordinates).

2) What writing skills (clarity, creativity, grammatical accuracy, etc.) do you look for in prospective employees (or subordinates)?

3) What writing weaknesses do you commonly encounter in business communications written by your employees (or subordinates) or by others?

Here, too, I requested a sample, this time of "typical...writing produced at your place of business or received by your concern." I did not ask for samples of either "good" or "bad" writing, because I was interested in getting a clearer idea of office routine, and because I did not want the respondent to have to evaluate a particular co-worker or client before my eyes.

Justification of Format

In composing the surveys as I did, I expected that the proportion of returns would not be high, because the questions asked the respondents to choose and to write their own words, a task more time-consuming, personal, and potentially embarrassing than the checking of boxes on a computer form. The format would also make tabulation more difficult, because I was not limiting the variety of the responses. However, I was willing to forego a higher return and ease of assessment as long as the surveys revealed a clear picture of the variety of writing types in demand and the variety of categories used to judge the writing.

Distribution

I tried to encourage as large a response as possible by delivering in person as many of the questionnaires as time allowed, so that the respondents could see their audience and perhaps feel some obligation to him. I presented several questionnaires as oral interviews. In addition I asked each NVWP Fellow to give a questionnaire to a friend in management; I made the same request of a class of literature students. Since a high proportion of the management questionnaires were delivered in these ways, their rate of return was understandably higher than that for the college questionnaires, almost all of which were delivered via office mailboxes.

Returns

Of 199 college questionnaires distributed, 38 (19%) were returned (as of 7/6/78). Of 80 management questionnaires 30 (37 1/2%) were returned.

Results

Variety resulted. I recorded 35 types of business writing, 29 writing skills sought in prospective employees, 25 weaknesses in business writing, 22 kinds of college assignments, 53 factors by which college writing is judged,

and 44 "weaknesses most often encountered" by the college teachers. In two questions, number 1 on the college poll and number 2 on the management poll, I gave a few illustrative sample answers. Because the respondents did in some cases allow me to give them the answers to these questions, rather than think of their own, college question 1 produced less variety of writing types than management question 1 (22 vs. 35). Similarly, management question 2 produced less varied responses (29) than college question 2 (53).

The variety of responses would mislead had I recorded as significant variants obvious synonyms, such as "poor diction" and "poor word choice." I strove, wherever possible, to tabulate freshly-worded responses (e.g., "wandering writing") within more common categories (e.g., "disorganization"). I did keep separate such related terms as "organization" and "coherence" because of important semantic differences, though I suspect that some respondents would consider the terms synonymous. I also regarded as variants such general terms as "mechanics" and their more specific relatives (e.g., "spelling"), where the respondent wrote one but not the other, or where the respondent wrote both and implied a difference between them (e.g., "mechanics and spelling").

Responses to Each Question (College Questionnaire)

Question 1: "What kinds of writing assignments do you give your students (e.g., research, analysis, short exam essay, book review, identification)?"

(Respondents: 38. Distribution by department: English (8), History (6), Business (4), Biology (3), Public Affairs (3), Math (2), Nursing (2), Fine and Performing Arts (2), Foreign Languages and Literature (2), Psychology (2), Chemistry (1), Education (1), Sociology (1); no dept. given (1)

20 respondents (52%) mentioned "research" assignments, though specific names varied; e.g., "research paper," "research of literature." 14 (36.4%)

noted "analysis," though again usage varied; e.g., "analytical essays," "analysis of legal cases on exams," "research projects involving analysis." The same number listed "book reviews" or similar terms connoting writing about literature: "literature review," "lit. crit.," "book critiques," etc. Most mentioned (32, 83.2%) were "short [or long] exam essays." Seven (18.2%) listed "identifications."

17 other variants were listed, including "exposition," "personal narrative," "bibliography cards," "review papers," "math proofs," "case reports," "field projects," and "instructional units." "Descriptive" and "argumentative" writing were mentioned, each more than once.

While the variety of the terms is itself significant, even more important is their ambiguity. In each of the oft-mentioned "research papers," "critiques," and "reports" I could not discern the varying amounts of "research" "analysis," and "book review," plus perhaps "exposition," "argumentation," "description," and "narrative." The most ambiguous "kind" of assignment mentioned, "term paper," was listed four times without definition.
This ambiguous assortment helps demonstrate the quandary of the student moving from teacher to teacher and from assignment to assignment.

Noteworthy, also, were two responses (5.2%) which listed no assignments. One stated a cryptic "None" and the other a desperate "very little--I have just about given up."

Responses to Question 2

53 factors judged significantly varying were listed by the 38 respondents. Of the 53, 33 (62%) were mentioned only once. Another 6 (11.2%) were mentioned twice. Four (7.4%) were listed three times each. Only 9 factors were mentioned 4 times or more each. In ascending order of recurrence these 9 included

"thoughtfullness" (4, 10.4% [38=100%]), "documentation" (5, 13%), "mechanics" (5, 13%), "effective sentences and paragraphs" (5, 13%), "coherence" (6, 15.6%), "punctuation" (10, 26%), "grammar" (12, 31.2%), "clarity" (15, 39%), "spelling" (18, 46.8%), and "organization" (20, 52%). Only "organization" was listed by more than half the respondents.

Of some significance are the 16 factors (including diction, pace, mechanics, bon mots, good lines, wit, and proper tone) used only by the 8 English teachers responding (avg. 2/respondent). The four business teachers contributed 6 exclusive usages (avg. 1.5), and the six history respondents contributed 8 (avg. 1.33). Members of the other departments added fewer than one exclusive usage per respondent.

Also possibly significant are the 26 items, almost half the total, not mentioned by any of the English teachers. These included "succinctness," "logic," and "documentation."

Respon[illegible] to Question 3

44 "weaknesses most often encountered" were listed. Of these, 21 (47.7%) were noted once, 8 (18.2%) twice, and 4 (9.1%) three times each. Only 11 weaknesses were listed four times or more. In ascending order of recurrence these were "poor development" (4, 10.4% [38=100%]), "lack of thesis" (4, 10.4%), "poor vocabulary" (4, 10.4%), "lack of planning" (4, 10.4%), "poor diction" (7, 18.6%), "poor paragraphing" (7, 18.6%), "lack of clarity" (7, 18.6%), "poor sentence structure" (8, 20.8%), "grammatical errors" (10, 26%), "spelling" (14, 36.4%), and "disorganization" (14, 36.4%). No single weakness was mentioned by even 40% of the respondents.

The answers to question 3 included several vitriolic assessments of

the teaching of writing. A math professor wrote: "It is because such a lousy job is being done in the teaching of English that I think all students should take foreign language." A history teacher complained, "...the primary, fundamental problem is the overwhelming evidence that from Grade I to the university level too many students have been taught English as though it was a second language apart from their daily usage. At no point in their education have they been introduced to the discipline of using the language, or any pride in their use of it." The lone respondent from sociology attacked organizational weaknesses, which, he said, "all our students should leave behind in their intro English courses." This teacher named another culprit, also: "I would join in a lobby immediately to ban multiple-choice tests in all upper-level courses."

Milder comments were volunteered by others. A public affairs professor called grammar and spelling "salient problems only for a decided minority of our students." A nursing instructor added that "spelling has improved somewhat over the last several years," and one English teacher saw "clear improvement in the students' knowledge of library research and the preparation of research papers." He noted with some approval that "many entering freshment have either a sullen or an anxious and well-motivated realization that they have serious lacks and need to do something about them."

Responses to Each Question (Management Questionnaire)

(30 respondents; distribution of respondents by business or agency: banking, insurance, accounting (13), manufacturing and systems planning (4), retail (5); government employees (7); employment not named (1))

Responses to Question 1

Partly because I did not specify writing types in this question, as I

had in College Question 1, I received a greater diversity of responses (35 vs. 22) from fewer respondents (30 vs. 38). This greater diversity was also due, no doubt, to the greater variety of writing tasks within business and government than within the classroom. Nevertheless, three categories dominated the management responses: "letters" (19, 63.3%), "memos" (18, 60%), and "analytical reports" (9, 30%). To letters might be added the more specific responses "commitment letters," "instruction letters," "collection letters," "sales letters," and "cables" (1 mention each). Related to "analytical reports" are "policy statements" (4, 13.3%), "systems analysis" (2, 6.7%), and "business plans" (2, 6.7%).

Other important responses included "personnel evaluations" (5, 16.7%) and promotional writing: "sales letters," "brochures," "promotional copy," "marketing newsletters," and "catalogs." Different editing tasks were noted 4 times (13.3%).

"Application forms," "order forms," "invoices," and "schedules" comprised another category.

Respondents generously sent varied samples of memos and letters, the latter including some messages sent by the respondent's office and others received by it.

Responses to Question 2

Partly because I did suggest three possible responses (clarity, creativity, and grammatical accuracy), the variety of responses to this question fell far short of the 53 responses to the similar question 2 on the college survey. Two of my three suggestions, clarity and grammatical accuracy, dominated the responses, with 20 (66.7%) and 16 (53.3%) mentions, respectively.

However, creativity, the third suggestion, received only 1 mention.

Other "writing skills" garnering noteworthy support were "conciseness" (8, 26.7%), "spelling" (6, 20%), "simple language" (6, 20%), and "accuracy" (5, 16.7%).

Note that in comparison with the college poll neither "spelling" (6, 20%) nor "organization," with only 3 (10%) mentions, was considered a high-priority ability of prospective employees. Of relatively greater importance in this survey were diction-related categories, including "clarity" (20, 66.7%), "simple language" (6, 20%), "tone" (3, 10%), "volabulary" (2, 6.7%), and the once-mentioned "avoidance of clichés," "use of the dictionary," and "use of the thesaurus."

Perhaps reflecting the dominance of memos and letters among management writings were the emphases on "brevity" (2, 6.7%) and "getting to the point" (2, 6.7%), an idea not listed on the college survey. This dominance might also help explain the greater importance of "conciseness" (6, 20%) and "simple language" (6, 20%), and the lesser import of "organization" (3, 10%) and "coherence" (1) in this survey than in the college poll.

Responses to Question 3

Clarity, conciseness, and diction were emphasized by these answers as well. "Lack of clarity" (11, 36.7%) led the responses, while the concern for conciseness was shown by the listing of "wordiness" (9, 30%), "over-complicated sentences" (5, 16.7%), "lack of brevity" (2, 6.7%), and main point buried" (2, 6.7%). Diction was stressed not only by "poor diction" (6, 20%), but also by "clichés" (3, 10%), "lack of simple language" (3, 10%), "pomposity" (2, 6.7%), "lack of precision" (1), "wrong tone" (1),and "lack of vocabulary" (1).

Of more concern here than in the answers to Question 2 were "disorganization" (8, 26.7%), "logic errors" (5, 16.7%), and "incoherence" (2, 6.7%).

"Poor spelling" was noted 11 times (36.7%), but other mechanics-related categories, "grammar" (5, 16.7%) and "punctuation" (2, 6.7%), were not heavily represented.

That no one mentioned "lack of originality" or "lack of creativity" as weaknesses follows from the neglect of these categories in the answers to Question 2. Indeed, one writer blamed what he saw as the "too great... stress placed on creative writing" in the schools as a "possible" hindrance to the "simple communication" he desired in business writing.

Other assessments of writing in business and government told a dismal story. "It has been my experience," wrote a bank official, "that it is difficult to find an employee or potential employee who can compose a good letter." A computer industry manager wrote that "few people seem able to write a simple sentence," while another manager pointed toward "abstract language"--"buzz words"--as a particularly nagging flaw. A retail store manager felt frustrated by incomprehensible memos from the main office and by her own employees' inability to follow simple instructions. Only one respondent, a book store manager, said that the memos she read were generally clear; however, she, too, complained about store clerks' comprehension problems.

The most bluntly despairing critique was offered by a federal manager: "...believe me, I sometimes think it's a jungle out here."

Conclusions and Recommendations

I launched these surveys in order more specifically to define the "writing crisis," and to help teach me what to teach. Despite the smallness of the survey population and the ambiguity of the answers, I have received some fairly reliable, clear messages.

1) Writing counts. The efficiency and the public image of businesses and agencies depend on concise, accurately-worded memos and letters. In the university the student's grade depends in part on his analyzing and organizing facts, and his writing them without frequent mechanical flaws.

2) The teacher preparing students for college should remember that the most common college writing task is the timed exam essay--the form most likely to defeat the unpracticed writer. As does the business memo or letter, the timed essay demands conciseness, deft analysis, and precise language--the fruits of regular writing and love of language.

3) The able writer is a versatile writer. Even a small survey reveals a boggling assortment of audiences, formats, and appropriate styles and vocabularies. This diversity suggests the folly of restricting students to one, two, or several writing structures. It suggests that writing be taught as the challenging choice of words and forms to suit an always new message and an always different audience. The writer must be encouraged to explore and to experiment: to work out his own solutions to communication problems. The teacher should show the student a wide variety of the writing types and voices that he may encounter and be called on to use.

4) The writing teacher will never please everybody and will rarely please anybody, even if he gives his students the best of attitudes toward writing. One can't please both the professor who demands a summary ending

to all papers and the other professor who despises summaries. Nor can he hope to do more for the instructor who is satisfied with his students' composition, but wishes we would work more on their handwriting. Nor can we smile with pride when one teacher compliments our teaching of research, while another wonders why we have not taught students the difference between primary and secondary sources. And how can we satisfy both the businessman who criticizes creative writing and the teacher who wants "bon mots" and "wit"?

Again, our best hope, I feel, is in our students' being taught to adapt to all the surprising demands that they will have to meet.

5) As part of the teaching of adaptability we English teachers have to convince our students that English is not a subject, but the tool essential to all their other subjects. I say this not to glorify my job, but to respect the urgency conveyed in the bitter, bewildered answers to both surveys. In our classrooms we need to encourage students to discuss and to cope in writing with specific tasks they may face in other disciplines. We should pursue opportunities to talk about writing with teachers outside our department; we might even invite other teachers into our classrooms to tell our students what they expect.

The English class might also be opened up to members of the business and professional communities. This experiment, where it has been tried, has strengthened the ties between school and community.*

*For an example see Edward R. Fagan, "Community-Based Resources for Teaching Composition," English Journal, 65 (Nov. 1976), 61-64.

We might also be bold enough to remind our colleagues in other departments that, if they are going to expect students to write, they must spell out the factors to be judged and suggest models to guide the students. To the teacher who balks, and replies, "Teaching writing is your job," we might point out the great variety of writing tasks listed by even the 38 respondents to the college survey, and the even greater variety of "factors," weighted differently, by which they grade writing.

To students we must suggest that if the teacher does not clearly describe tasks, does not provide models, or does not write clear questions, then the student must ask for these helps. We would have to admit that this direct approach is a radical alternative to the usually sneaky business of "psyching out" the teacher--a practice which the teacher himself provokes. We may have to be prepared to back up a student whose teacher resents him for asking direct questions. We might point out to both teacher and student that if the student does not ask for clarity of standards and questions, then he will pay for his ignorance.

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I. Terms Used to Denote Writing Tasks and Types Assigned in GMU Classes
(38 Respondents; 13 Departments)

exam essays (short and long) 32
research (including "research paper," "research of literature," etc.) 20
analysis (including "analytical essays," "analysis of legal cases on exams," "research projects involving analysis," etc.)14
book reviews (including "literature review," "lit. crit.," "book critiques," etc.) 74
identifications 7
term paper 4
exposition 2
description
argumentation
personal narrative
bibliography cards
review papers
math proofs
field projects
instructional units
definitions
outlines of business cases
case reports
study of a topic in history
log
diary
group project reports
article summaries
lesson plans
field experience summaries

(Figures show number of respondents using term or other term not significantly varying)

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II. Factors by Which College Writing is Judged (38 Respondents; 13 Departments)

organization 20
spelling 18
clarity 15
grammar 12
punctuation 10
coherence 6
effective sentences and paragraphs 5
mechanics 5
documentation 5
thoughtfulness 4
diction 3
well-developed paragraphs 3
logic 3
succinctness 3
development 2
imagination 2
complete sentences 2
syntax 2
good conclusion 2
appropriate style 2
content
pace
bon mots
good lines
wit
focus
grasp of subject
complex sentences
varied sentence structure
proper tone
ability to scan poetry
interesting writing
technical competence
inspiration
correct form
continuity
completeness
professionalism
brevity
English
knowledge of the subject
systematic exposition
proofreading ability
good opening
transitions
margins
command of topic
grace
creative thought
integration of theory
accuracy
legibility
normal prose

(Figures show number of respondents using term or other term not significantly different in meaning)

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III. "Weaknesses Most Often Encountered" by College Teachers (38 Respondents; 13 Departments)

disorganization 14
misspelling 14
grammatical errors 10
poor sentence structure 8
lack of clarity 7
poor paragraphing 7
poor diction 7
lack of planning 4
poor vocabulary 4
lack of thesis 4
poor development 4
wordiness 3
indefinite voice 3
logic failures 3
no focus 3
stale language 2
poor transitions 2
confusion of narrative and exposition 2
poor punctuating 2
lack of subordination 2
poor documentation 2
no pride in use of language 2
poor knowledge of syntax 2
prosaic beginnings
dull summary endings
shortness
misuse of homonyms
inability to handle different writing situations
inability to see implications of one's writing
tense errors
poor argumentation
no logic
lack of intro. and concluding segments
confusion of research and literature review
inappropriate tone
no use of dictionary
no sense of nuance
no feel for words
no learning from previous errors
pomposity
misplaced modifiers
lack of succinctness
predictability
illegibility

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IV. Terms Used to Denote Writing Tasks and Types in Business and Governement (30 Respondents)

letters 19
memos 18
analytical reports 9
personnel evaluations 5
policy statements 4
business plans 2
briefing papers 2
systems analysis 2
brochures 2
editing and publishing 4
application form
stock reports
schedules
invoices
"yes and no" forms
cables
budget proposals
program evaluations
critiques of speeches
critiques of books
minutes
texts
monographs
newsletters
promotional copy
sales letters
annual reports
marketing newsletters
contracts
commitment letters
instruction letters
regulatory disclosures
collection letters
Library of Congress publications
catalogs

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V. "Writing Skills Sought in Prospective Employees" (30 Respondents)

clarity 20 (term suggested on questionnaire)
grammatical accuracy 16 (term suggested on questionnaire)
conciseness 8
spelling 6
simple language 6
accuracy 5
logic 3
tone 3
organization 3
getting to the point 2
research skills 2
brevity 2
analysis 2
vocabulary 2
originality
good sentence structure
punctuation
use of dictionary
use of thesaurus
ability to synthesize
avoidance of clichés
ability to construct form letters
coherence
emphasis of key points
creativity (term suggested on questionnaire)
ability to compose memos and short letters
legibility

The number of items may have been limited by questioner's suggestion of three sample responses.

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VI. "Weaknesses Commonly Encountered in Business Communications" (30 Respondents)

lack of clarity 11
poor spelling 11
wordiness 9
disorganization 8
poor sentence structure 7
over-complicated sentences 6
poor diction 5
logic errors 5
poor grammar 5
clichés 3
lack of simple language 3
main points buried 2
fragments 2
poor punctuating 2
incoherence 2
incorrect format 2
pomposity 2
lack of brevity 2
wrong tone
poor vocabulary
imprecision
excessive footnoting
inaccuracy
unattractiveness
sloppiness

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Selected Bibliography

Britton, James, Tony Burgess, Nancy Martin, Alex McLeod, and Harold Rosen. The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18). London: Macmillan, 1975.

Exhaustive research. Valuable for its distinctions between audiences and for its recognition of the "transactional," "poetic," and "expressive" modes of writing.

Emig, Janet. The Composing Process of Twelfth Grades. Urbana: NCTE, 1971.

By a top American writing researcher, this book explains the crucial differences and connections between "extensive" writing (most used in schools) and "reflexive" writing (like Britton's "Expressive"), which evolves from personal interest and idea, and is therefore the writing most often in demand outside the school.

Fagan, Edward R. "Community-Based Resources for Teaching Composition," English Journal, Nov. 1976, 61-64.

Excellent example of how school and business community can work together to improve student writing.

Gere, Anne Ruggles. "Writing and WRITING," English Journal, Nov. 1977, 60-64.

Research among U. of Washington faculty which shows variety of writing tasks demanded by teachers across the curriculum.

Maxwell, Rhoda, and Stephen Judy. "Science Writing in the English Classroom," English Journal, April 1978, 78-81.

An example of how writing can cross the curriculum, if teachers co-operate.

Newkirk, Thomas R., Thomas D. Cameron, and Cynthia L. Selfe. "What Johnny Can't Write: A University View of Freshman Writing Ability," English Journal, Nov. 1977, 65-69.

Research on writing criteria used by English instructors at U. of Texas.

Pichaske, David R. "Freshman Comp.: What Is This Shit?" College English, 38[2] (Oct. 1976), 117-24.

Title indicates the tone of this polemic against "lit. crit." and "themes" in English comp.; states need for English teachers to explore what is really being written outside of schools.